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CASE STUDY

Southampton Local Development Framework –Developing the Learning Potential of Sustainability Appraisal

OVERVIEW

Following the European SEA Directive, Sustainability Appraisals (SA) (incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment - SEA) form an essential part of the development of many regional and district wide plans as well as small area action plans. SA/SEA exercises present a useful mechanism through which more sustainable and environmentally conscious patterns of development can be promoted.

BACKGROUND

One of the areas most affected by the European SEA Directive in England is spatial planning. SA/SEA activity is now entailing a considerable commitment of time and resources, not just from the public sector, but also from private and voluntary sector organisations that are being called upon to contribute to and respond to these appraisals in various ways. SA/SEA exercises appear to present a useful mechanism through which more sustainable and environmentally conscious patterns of development can be promoted. They have the potential to do this, both directly, in the form of making changes to the plans concerned (sometimes called single loop or instrumental learning), but also by providing spaces for more general dialogue about sustainability considerations. They have the potential to contribute to wider organisational and social learning which can lead, over time, to more fundamental changes to norms and practices in support of sustainable development (double loop or transformational learning).

THE PROJECT

This Economic and Social Research Council and HCA Academy funded project explored how the learning potential of SA exercises could be developed further. A framework for understanding the different types of learning outcome in SA was used to analyse three case studies in England, Germany and Italy.

In England the research considered the Sustainability Appraisal associated with Southampton City Council's Local Development Framework Core Strategy which had been identified as an example of good SA practice. The SA was undertaken by Halcrow Group Limited in close liaison with the Local Development Framework Team who commissioned the work. The exercise also benefited from the input of the Council's Sustainability Team who acted as critical friends and advisors throughout the process. The approach to the SA closely followed government guidance on 'Sustainability Appraisal of Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Documents' issued by the ODPM in 2005. The SA involved 5 Stages of work:

The 5 Stage of Sustainability Appraisal	
A	Setting the context & objectives, establishing the baseline & deciding scope
B	Developing & refining alternatives & assessing the effects
C	Preparing the Sustainability Report
D	Consulting on the preferred options of the plan & the Sustainability Report
E	Monitoring the significant effects of implementing the plan on the environment

Key Words

■ Sustainability ■ Appraisal ■ Leadership ■ Planning ■ Education



Public consultation was undertaken at all stages of the SA exercise. In addition to the required statutory consultations with English Heritage, the Environment Agency and Natural England, Southampton City Council also formally requested an input from:

City of Southampton Society	New Forest District Council
Eastleigh Council	New Forest National Park Authority
Government Office for the South East	South East England Development Agency
Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust	South East England Regional Assembly
Hampshire County Council	Southampton Sustainability Forum
Highways Agency	South East Climate Change Partnership
Isle of Wight Council	Test Valley Borough Council

The various SA reports also formed part of the wider community consultation processes associated with the preparation of the plan and were made available on Southampton City Council's website.

THE IMPACT

The project revealed that a range of positive learning outcomes were evident from the SA of Southampton City Council's Local Development Framework Core Strategy. The table below summarises the results. The darker shading indicates where the learning was judged to be most intense.

As anticipated instrumental learning for those individuals most closely involved and for the core organisation commissioning the SA, was the strongest area of learning. This was particularly so in terms of *knowledge acquisition and comprehension* related to the legal and procedural requirements of SEA. In Southampton City Council's case (as in the German and Italian case studies) it was recognised that the SEA Directive brought new requirements and that external consultants could be helpful in ensuring compliance with the new regime. However, the research revealed that council officers felt much more confident about undertaking future SEAs in-house after completing the SA and were generally more familiar with the legislation and guidance, terms and concepts etc. In future SAs it was felt that consultants might be used in different way, perhaps acting in a more advisory capacity.

Levels of Understanding	Individual	Organisational	Social	Types of Learning	Transformatory Learning -----Instrumental Learning
Evaluation	<i>Know why</i> Questioning underlying principles Changing values and behaviours	<i>Know why</i> Integrating principles into Organisational culture Changing norms and practices	<i>Know why</i> Changing values and behaviours	<i>Know why</i> Double Loop Learning	
Synthesis	Applying understanding to other areas	Applying understanding to other areas	Applying understanding to other areas		
Analysis Application	<i>Know how</i> Adjusting the Plan Adjusting SEA Process	<i>Know how</i> Adjusting the Plan Adjusting SEA Process	<i>Know how</i> Adjusting responses to Plan Adjusting input to SEA process	<i>Know how</i> Single Loop Learning <i>Know That</i>	
Comprehension	<i>Know that</i> (Development of individual/organisational capacity – initially likely to be a few ‘experts’) (Legal/administrative/political procedures) (Familiarity of terms and concepts)				
Knowledge acquisition					

Beyond the basic acquisition of knowledge and comprehension about the process of SA, there was also evidence of *application* of this understanding in terms of close integration of the SA with plan preparation and of the *analysis* emerging from the SA resulting in changes being made to the plan. Some interviewees felt that the changes were relatively modest, reflecting the fact that sustainability considerations were already well embedded in the Council's activities.

Within this context, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of interviewees believed that the SA had not lead to double-loop or transformatory learning in support of sustainable development. Despite this there was evidence that the SA was having some more subtle, but still beneficial, higher level learning outcomes in terms of *applying the understanding* derived from the SA to other areas. For example, it had lead to improved collection and maintenance of base-line environmental data which the Sustainability Team were updating and it was felt by some that, over time, this would provide a better trend based understanding which could inform a range of Council activities. The SA also involved a range of other council departments and external organisations and contributed in a small way to closer working relationships and mutual understanding, prompting for example, the

development of Health Impact Assessment in the local health authority and Community Safety Audits by the police authority, and non statutory SAs that related to the Council's lighting strategy. In many of these instances of wider application, the Sustainability Team were acting in an advisory and supporting capacity.

LESSONS LEARNED

Sustainability Appraisal has the potential to play a significant role in individual, organisational and wider social/community learning about sustainability matters. Currently, the focus of learning in many SA exercises tends to be upon instrumental matters related to understanding the SA process itself and to making adjustments to the plans concerned. These are important, but changes directly arising from the SA may seem frustratingly modest. However, greater recognition should be given to the indirect, longer term and more subtle learning potential of SA. Opportunities for SA to promote double-loop/transformational learning in support of sustainable development should be given more thought in designing SA methodologies and managing SA processes.

The experience of Southampton City Council demonstrates the value of having a dedicated Sustainability Team who have the remit and flexibility to build upon the statutory requirements of SA. SA could be placed at the heart of a strategic learning programme which enables the organisation and wider community to keep abreast of the latest thinking about sustainable development and enter into a dialogue about how this should shape the future of their area.

As organisations become more confident in approaching SA and attempt to integrate it into wider learning processes, very prescriptive government guidance may no longer be required and may inhibit innovation and limit

the learning potential of SA. Instead guidance should encourage innovation and experimentation, recognising that learning about sustainability is a core objective of SA.

In the longer term there is potential for Institutional level SA to assess the extent to which sustainability considerations are embedded within organisational norms and practices. As understanding in this area is developing fast, it could also evaluate the extent to which latest thinking on sustainability matters informs critical reflection within organisations and informs wider community debate.

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